

# SAILFISH

No place in the world offers the kind of year-round sailfish action anglers can find offshore of the ancient Mayan stronghold.

*Story and photos by Gary Kramer*

# OF GUATEMALA

**S**ince the early 1990s, when its Pacific Coast offshore fishing first came in focus, Guatemala has built its sporting reputation around a tremendous sailfish resource. This Central American country is now considered the best place in the world to catch a sail on a fly. And no wonder. Where else can you see 20 or more sailfish in the baits virtually every day, enjoy solid action all year long, and have a fleet of quality boats and crews at your disposal—all less than a three-hour flight from Miami?

I first traveled to Guatemala for billfish in 2002, and on my most recent trip there noticed some changes during the ride from Guatemala City to Iztapa, a small coastal village near Puerto San José. The highway near the city was more crowded, and the potholes and detours along the way were a thing of the past. But the verdant countryside was still dominated by banana plantations, mango orchards, pineapple fields, and scattered villages. Upon arrival at Pacific Fins Resort, we were greeted with a local beverage fashioned from fruit juice and Guatemala's famous 23-year-old rum—Zacapa Centenario. After being shown to our rooms, I immediately noticed a change. Since the new owner, Niels Erichsen, purchased the resort in 2006, the

rooms had been refurbished, a gourmet menu developed, and new boats acquired. All the upgrades were welcomed, but what about the fly fishing for sails? Was it going to be as good in 2012 as it had been a decade earlier?

**T**he next morning dawned bright and clear, and after a breakfast cooked to order, we walked less than 50 feet to the docks and met our crew—Captain Carlos and his mates, Jorge and Cristian. The sun was peaking above the horizon as we boarded the *Gypsy*—an immaculate 33-foot twin-diesel Blackfin.

Once we cleared the breakwater, the skipper pushed the throttle forward and pointed the boat in a southwest compass

heading. The fishing grounds off Iztapa are huge, and depending on the fish, concentrations can be anywhere from a few miles to as many as 40 miles offshore. That first morning the target area was 20 miles offshore, where the fleet had located a good concentration of sailfish the day before. We reached the fishing grounds in just over an hour. The captain signaled the mate to lower the outriggers, and before long we were trolling rigged ballyhoo from the two outriggers and from two flat lines off the stern. All were rigged without hooks and would act as teasers to lure the sails close to the boat. We came to catch sails with a fly rod, so we rigged two 12-weight rods with large-arbor saltwater reels filled with floating lines and 200 yards of 30-pound Dacron backing.



Peak angling for sailfish off the coast of Iztapa runs from October through May. (Inset) The deckhand leaders a sailfish estimated to weigh about 100 pounds.

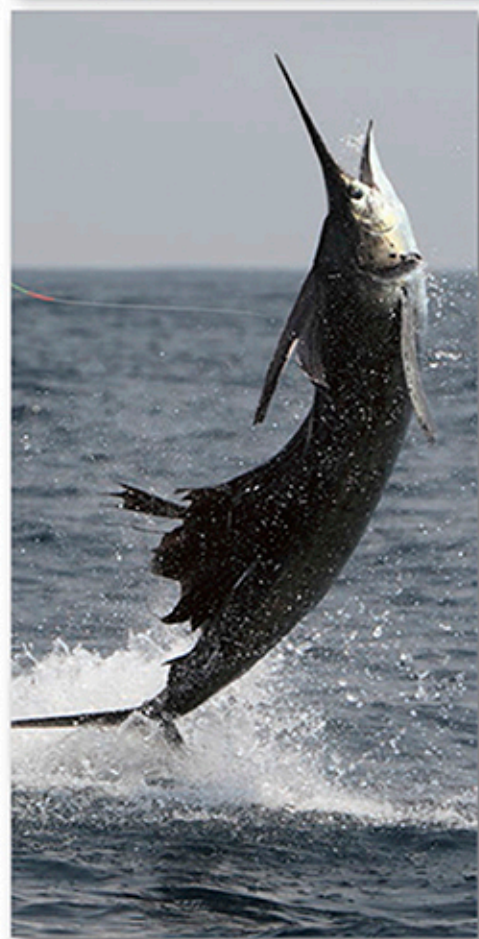


When fly fishing for sailfish, the goal is to tease the fish to within a few yards of the stern. When the fish is close and focused on the bait, the crew pulls the teaser out of the water, and the boat goes into neutral. At that point, the angler casts his fly (a brightly colored popper) to the same area where the teaser was only seconds before. In a perfect world, the sailfish takes the popper, and you strike the fish in the opposite direction of the take.

Once the baits were deployed, my fishing buddy, Ken Mayer, and I along with the crew began looking for signs of activity—fish chasing bait, a jumping sailfish, bird



The author's forays offshore ranged as far as 30 miles offshore and averaged four fish a day on fly gear. Each fight featured blistering runs, spectacular leaps, and big-game thrills.



activity—anything out of the ordinary.

About 30 minutes after the baits were in the water, the skipper spotted a sail behind the port outrigger. That's when we all sprang into action and feverishly cranked in the unmolested baits while Cristian worked the line the sailfish had selected. He expertly brought in the bait, teasing the sailfish closer and closer to the boat. The sailfish moved up only to veer off at the last second. The fish sounded, and we lost track of him.

Less than a minute later, it surprised us by coming up behind the bait. I grabbed a fly rod and stripped enough line from the reel into a five-gallon bucket to make a decent presentation, then stood on the stern waiting for the signal to cast. As the fish approached, I dropped just enough line over the stern to clear the leader, and I was wound as tight as a hockey player about to deliver a slap shot to a well-guarded goal.

By the time the mate teased the sail into the prop wash, it was lit up like a neon sign and less than 30 feet behind the boat. When Carlos said "Now!" Cristian jerked the ballyhoo out of the water, and

at the same moment I made one false cast, then dropped the popper a foot in front of the frenzied sailfish.

It took a millisecond for the sail to see the popper, raise its bill, grab the fly, and turn. I let the fish take line for a few seconds, then on command from the mate, lifted the rod tip hard against the opposing force to make sure the hook was set. Two strip strikes followed, and the sailfish responded with a series of signature tail-walking and greyhounding runs. Before I knew it, he was into my backing, and 100 yards of 30-pound Dacron flew from the reel. I maintained steady pressure as the fish jumped at least a dozen times. About 30 minutes after the hook was set, Jorge leaedered the fish, and an estimated 100-pound Pacific sailfish was next to the boat. After the customary photos were taken, we towed the fish alongside for a few minutes to make sure it was well oxygenated and then released.

About 20 minutes later, we watched two sailfish come up behind the boat and knock a bait from the starboard outrigger. Then the sails decided to fight over the bait on the port outrigger. The mate grabbed the rod, pulled it from the outrigger clip and managed to coax one of the fish within casting distance. But just before Ken could present the fly, the sailfish sounded and disappeared. We trolled the teaser in a circular pattern for several minutes without success.

The next trolling session was longer—more than an hour passed and the steady hum and vibration of the diesel engines nearly put me to sleep. Suddenly, the captain yelled, "Fish, port side!" A sailfish was behind the port flat line. Cristian grabbed the rod and reeled the bait toward the boat with the sailfish in hot pursuit. As the fish accelerated, he increased the speed of the retrieve, always keeping the bait just ahead of the hot billfish. When the sail was only a few yards behind the boat, the mate pulled the teaser from the water.

Ken cast the popper, which traveled through the air like a Styrofoam cup on a string. The cast was short! With the mates, me, and the skipper all yelling instructions in unison, he pulled the line back and made another cast to the now confused

sailfish. The second cast was on target, and with a slash of its swordlike bill, the sailfish took the popper and turned away. Ken lowered the rod and struck the sail as it stripped line from the reel—half jumping, half swimming, and heading in the opposite direction. Seconds later, I looked down at the reel—most of the backing was gone! As Ken kept steady pressure on the line, the captain put the boat in reverse to back down on the fish. In seconds, white water rushed over the stern, soaking all of us to the bone. It was a moment of billfishing exhilaration that has to be experienced to be believed! The 110-pound sailfish performed admirably, allowing me to snap a number of aerial photos before coming alongside after about 40 minutes.

Overall, the fishing was excellent. The first day we fished 20 miles offshore, the second about 30 miles, and the third day there was a concentration of fish only 15 miles from the beach. We fished three days and raised from 10 to 15 sailfish each day, catching and releasing an average of four on fly gear. The fish were in the



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## EXPEDITIONS

80- to 110-pound class. The resort has five boats—31- to 37-foot twin diesels that generally carry two to four anglers and can reach even the farthest fishing grounds in about two hours.

Some recent statistics from Pacific Fins includes a four-day trip in late January 2013 when one angler had 76 sailfish in the baits, 35 takes, and caught and released 20 sailfish on a fly. On a three-day trip in early January 2013, 16 anglers on four boats had 350 sailfish in the baits, 288 takes, and caught and released 195

sailfish on both conventional and fly gear. Now, that's big game fly fishing!

One of the reasons this fishery has been maintained and the density of sailfish remains high is the Guatemalan ban



## If You Go

### THE COUNTRY

Guatemala has been called the travel bargain of the Americas. Experienced travelers say it's like Mexico used to be two decades ago. This Central American country is easily accessible, spectacularly beautiful, friendly, safe, intriguing and relatively inexpensive. What makes Guatemala unique is no single ingredient but the sum of its many parts. From the black sand beaches of the Pacific to the frigid peaks of 30 volcanos, from cactus-studded deserts to tropical rain forests, Guatemala is one of the most ecologically diverse countries in the world.

### THE RESORT

Pacific Fins Resort is a full-service fishing destination. With four villas each with two separate bedrooms and two double suites, all with private baths, the resort can accommodate up to 20 anglers. Completely refurbished in 2006, the resort has a full bar, swimming pool, and excellent food ordered from a full restaurant menu. A massage therapist is available, and the boat docks are literally only a few steps from your room. Contact Trek International Safaris (1-800-654-9915, [www.treksafaris.com](http://www.treksafaris.com)) for details and arrangements.

### GETTING THERE

Several major airlines serve Guatemala City. American Airlines, United, and Lacs have daily direct flights from Dallas, Miami, Houston, and Los Angeles. A representative from Pacific Fins will meet you at the airport and transport you 90 minutes over good roads to the resort.

### CLIMATE AND CLOTHING

The climate of Guatemala is fairly uniform throughout the year. The exception is the amount of precipitation, which essentially defines the seasons. From May to November, the climate is generally rainy with tropical showers in the afternoons. November through April are the dry months. The Pacific Coast is hot and humid, with daytime temperatures averaging 85 to 95 degrees F and nights rarely dropping below 70 degrees. Dress for warm humid weather, and be sure to use plenty of sunscreen. For those sensitive to the tropical sun, long sleeves and long pants are recommended. Bugs are nonexistent offshore, but hats are a must.

### SIDE TRIPS

About an hour drive west of Guatemala City is Antigua. Founded in 1543, it is among the world's best preserved colonial cities, with well-preserved architecture, beautiful surroundings, and cobblestone streets. It is a magical and captivating small town that makes you feel time might have stopped some 300 years ago.

Located in the northeastern region of the country, Tikal and the Petén have more than 50,000 square kilometers of protected rain forest. In addition, the Mayan Ruins of Tikal, declared a UNESCO World Heritage site, and dozens of others, are among the greatest archeological wonders in the world. Their towering pyramids stretch toward the heavens beyond the highest jungle canopy, providing a mystical view of the areas rich flora and teeming fauna, and a feel for the mysteries of this ancient culture. Contact [www.visitguatemala.com](http://www.visitguatemala.com) for a complete guide to Guatemala.

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## EXPEDITIONS



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on longline fishing—a practice that has devastated other billfishing areas around the world. While fishing for sails is good all year long, the peak season is November through May. For anglers looking for a world record, the best time is October through December, when there are fewer but larger sailfish present. While the fishery for marlin (primarily blue and a few black) is less developed, the best action is August through December. As you already noticed, sailfish are the main quarry but there also are dorado (dolphinfish) and yellowfin tuna. During our three days offshore, we caught several small dorado (which we kept for dinner) and missed a couple of larger fish. Additionally, there is an inshore fishery for roosterfish, snappers, crevalle jacks, and snook that we did not investigate and has been largely overlooked for fly fishing. So next time you think of sailfish, consider booking a trip to Guatemala. It's the surest destination on the planet to target sailfish with a fly rod, and one where the fishing will almost certainly exceed your highest expectations!

Gary Kramer is a freelance writer/photographer based in Willows, California. During the past three decades, he has visited 56 foreign countries in pursuit of fish and game.

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